

Boarding

Until the early 1970s, boarders were 'kings of the castle. We looked with disdain on the day boys whom we called "greasies".¹ Boarders dominated in Prefect groups, Boat Race Crew membership and the Football Team. Reasons for such overt bias were partly grounded in allegiance to certain traditions passed on from generation to generation of boarding families. Another factor was sheer strength of numbers, and that the boarders were present at the College all the time. During the late 1940s, around half the students were boarders; during the 1950s and 1960s, boarders accounted for between 30 and 40 per cent of the total enrolment.

There is no doubt that the family tradition of boarding at the College was the main reason for the continued enrolment of boys from Presbyterian families, particularly from large neighbouring towns in the Western District, but also from outlying properties. Alternatives such as Hamilton College and Ballarat College have become regarded as viable alternatives only since the 1980s. Strong intergenerational support from boarding families became reflected in the several branches of the Old Geelong Collegians' Association, established by the early 1950s in Hamilton, Gippsland, Adelaide and Sydney. More branches followed during the 1960s, at Willaura, Mildura, Wimmera, Colac and in the Mallee–Riverina area. Many boarders of the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s still admit considerable affection for the opportunities provided by boarding at the College, despite acknowledged homesickness, cramped conditions and an institutional atmosphere. 'If you could survive psychologically, you were not doing too badly, and the camaraderie is lifelong', reflects Stewart McArthur, who boarded during the 1950s.² Ian Macmillan, a boarder (1947–54) from Mildura whose father and uncles had also been boarders at the College, believed that boarding was 'the heart of the school. I got a huge amount out of the freedom we were allowed, especially on the weekends. We'd ride bikes miles away or we'd take a picnic and row right down to Lake Connewarre and back. The boarders' influence was very significant in the school at that time.'³

With a waiting list of 800 boarders by 1960, the number of boys boarding at the College gradually rose during the 1960s and peaked at 299 in 1970.⁴ With this came income and new families who were able to enjoy the benefits of the physical transformation of the College. However, the worst aspects of a large boarding school were now endemic, and would prove to be difficult to address. As numbers grew, their management became more difficult.



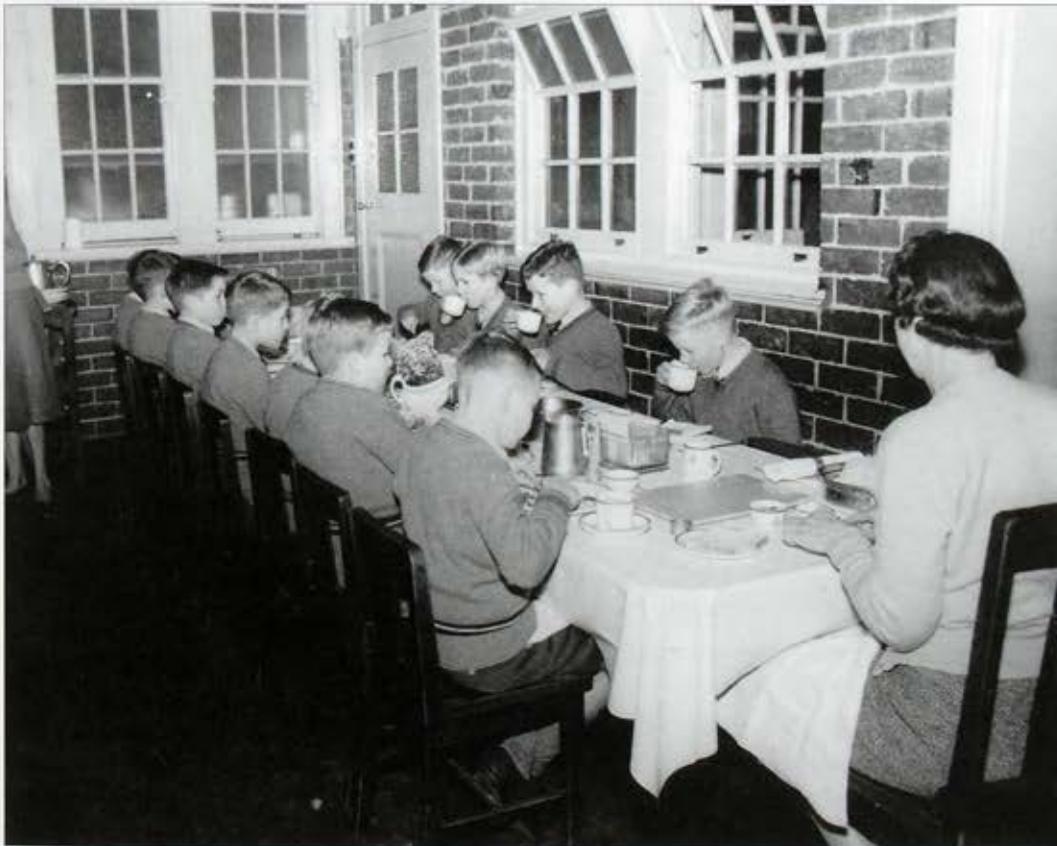
Above: Rolland House. Dorm 1 boys going to bed, c1945

Below: Rolland House playroom, c1945

The introduction of a new House system in 1961 attempted to address these problems. Six Houses were created – three for day boys (Calvert, McArthur and Shannon) and three for boarders (Morrison, Mackie and Warrinn) – and all had students ranging from Forms 3 to 6. Knowle House, created in 1952, had been the only day boy House up until this time. This was Mr Thwaites at his best – the new House system was deliberately designed to move away from the dominance of the boarding houses, despite the fact that the College was still very much a boarding school. It sought to introduce the notion of vertical pastoral care and, eventually, the integration of boarders and day boys in Houses with each other.

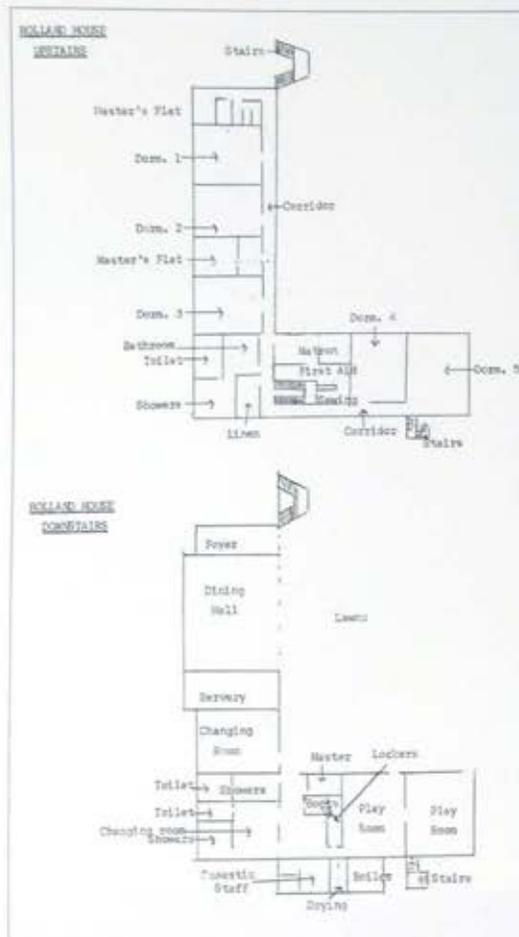
While the new system fostered some renewed 'school spirit', as boys became loyal to and proud of their new House, it gave rise to fierce rivalry between the day boy and boarding houses and, contrary to Mr Thwaites' aims, widened the gap between those two groups, according to 1964's School Captain, Paul Sheahan.⁵ Boarding houses continued to dominate the inter-House sporting competition; music, although included as an inter-House competition since 1950, did not count towards the House Cup and scarcely even figured in the House reports in *Pegasus*. Boarders were still favoured for selection in the main interschool sports teams, but by 1970 there is some evidence that demonstrates senior students' awareness of the continued need for integration between day boys and boarders: 'I strongly suggest if you are a day boy [School Captain] to get a room at school which you are entitled to and stay there often to get to know the boarders. If you are a boarder, avoid being biased against day boys', wrote Hugh Seward, School Captain in 1970, in words of advice to his successors.⁶

By 1964, there were four separate boarding houses, including the new Rolland House for the seventy-plus junior boarders on the new Preparatory School site, who had transferred



Older students playing indoor cricket, c1945

Junior Dining Hall, c1940–60



The new Rolland House, 1964. Reproduced with permission from Joan Sweetman

from the house called Mossgiel in Noble Street, after it was purchased in 1961. For junior boarders, looked after by the indefatigable Miss Grenfell since 1943, Rolland House provided five smaller dormitories of fourteen boys in each, playrooms, a dining hall, and full facilities for resident Masters and domestics:

Screened from the road by shrubs and trees, it is a little world of our own. It has been a cheerful, lively time. We have found plenty to do; outdoors there are the front lawns for play or sunbathing, games too on the old tennis court. Indoors we read, write letters, catch up with work! When musically inclined, there's the radio and our record player; sometimes both going together in competition and television of course. Some of us go in for hobbies, making aeroplanes or whatnot. For livelier indoor occupation, we have our two Table Tennis tables. In good weather we have had several Sunday excursions for bathing.⁷

Rolland House peaked at seventy-seven boarders in 1969, most of whom were boys from Forms 1 and 2.

Senior students tested school authority as they did in other boarding schools during the 1960s, and the policing of drinking, smoking and a range of sexual activities were added to Housemasters' onerous list of duties.⁸ In the senior boarding houses, bullying proved difficult to eradicate, and was endorsed by some senior boarders through archaic initiation rituals. Many students were able to endure this sort of treatment, but some did not. One student ran away, and another was removed from the College and hospitalised for shock treatment to eradicate the memory of his trauma. Mr Carrington, Boarding Housemaster, was unimpressed by the school's lack of response to bullying, although in his opinion there was 'rather too much of the boy's inhumanity to boy being passed off as of little importance in the community'.⁹

When Mr Elliott, after some years teaching at Geelong Grammar, arrived back at the College in 1963 to be Warrinn's Housemaster, he was surprised at the school's sudden change of character in less than ten years. 'It seemed to me that the College had suddenly lost its way. It had become coarse.'¹⁰ He immediately noticed the differences between the boarding house atmosphere and management of both schools. Timbertop was 'a very tightly run ship', whereas boarding at the College was 'bedlam' and the Grammar School overall seemed to have 'a much more pleasant atmosphere'.¹¹ At last, something was done in 1966 when, somewhat surprisingly, Mr Thwaites intervened and expelled two boys for bullying. 'It has made all the difference in the school. The whole atmosphere seems cleaner and happier. The decent boys feel that they have some standing and at least some protection within the school discipline.'¹²

Another factor that underwent significant change during the 1960s was the management of boarders' religious observance, which up until then had been a relatively straightforward part of school life. Senior students' changing attitudes to religion proved especially difficult to manage. Boarders had to attend church on Sunday mornings as well as a service in Morrison Hall in the evenings, which became unpopular:

Quite a large body of sixth formers are anxious to discuss matters of Faith and Belief and to take the attitude that they cannot believe what they cannot prove. That has led to demands or requests for a change in the form of the Sunday evening service in Morrison Hall. I fear that the said service has long been rather unpopular with the troops and I must admit that I find it rather hard to take when I go over on my duty night. The place is wrong and the whole atmosphere seems to be out of sympathy with the service itself.¹³

A new approach was tried in 1965, when boys were allowed to run their own services on Sunday evenings in the hall. They included music such as traditional spirituals, which proved to be very popular.

St David's Church, nearby on Aphrasia Street, replaced St George's as the College-affiliated church in 1962. It was a very significant decision, given the history of the College's ties to St George's, but one that seemed sensibly designed to make compulsory Sunday morning church attendance easier for Presbyterian boarders. The idea was first mooted as far back as 1919 by the St David's congregation, which asked boarders to attend Sunday morning services, but allegiance to St George's was retained.¹⁴ The drift to St David's began in the 1950s, and Preparatory School boarders worshipped at St David's from at least that period. The Reverend McLean, a member of that parish, was inducted at a service there to be the College's Chaplain in 1954. Other members of the College staff, such as Mr Davey, and parents were also part of the St David's congregation. Dr Buntine proposed in 1958 that boarders attend St David's instead of St George's but, perhaps wisely, deferred the change until after the Centenary in 1961. The Centenary services, held at St David's that year, telegraphed Mr Thwaites' intentions. Scarcely one month after the Centenary celebrations, he made the change without consulting Council. Elders at St George's were not pleased: 'we deeply regret the proposed severing of a unique historical tie and a tradition extending over 100 years ... we are not convinced that the proposed change is in the best interests of the Church as a whole nor that the proposed change will achieve the desired purpose for a closer link with parish life'.¹⁵ Nevertheless, senior boarders attended the last service there in May 1962. For them, St David's was far more convenient and removed one more obstacle from students' acceptance of religious observance.

The alleviation of overcrowding in the boarding houses and the style of boarders' accommodation became subjects of considerable concern. In 1967, the College's Master Plan included a new senior boarding house as a priority. Senior boarders in Morrison House, still located upstairs in the original school building, needed more privacy and better study facilities to aid overall academic improvement. The architects proposed a completely new model of boarding accommodation. Rather than replicate an old-fashioned approach with large dormitories, along the lines of Mackie House, clusters of cottage-style units, with eight students in each, would provide privacy and better study habits with the benefits of small, family-style group living. Large recreational and dining areas would bring all the boarders together. Purpose-built facilities to replace Morrison House and Warrinn House were proposed for the north-west corner of the Senior School site and the new Mossgiel property. Areas of Mackie could be converted to bed-study units. Although loved by generations of young boarders, Warrinn, built in 1888, was run-down, despite several renovations and extensions. 'The public school boasts the encouragement of initiative and individuality and at the same time provides a boarding system which cannot give these qualities their rightful scope', wrote Neil Everist in his report; 'the small-unit boarding house would allow the relaxation of "mass control" which could in turn encourage the exercise of the constructive individuality at which we aim'.¹⁶

However, nothing happened immediately. After much discussion, it was eventually decided that the boarding house development should take priority over a swimming pool because of the prevailing belief that, despite a shrinking market, the College's reputation 'stands or falls by virtue of its boarding establishment'.¹⁷ In 1970, large Mackie dormitories were partitioned for privacy, floors were carpeted and hot water was added to the showers. In 1972, Morrison House became a day boy house. Morrison boarders from Forms 3 and 4 were reallocated to

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Preparatory School dining room, c1963–67. J. Paton, I. Smith, J. Dickson, G. Chapman, P. Laidlaw, P. Knight, R. Sheridan. Photo: John Stephen Paton Album



Mackie and Warrinn, and older boarders formed a Senior Residents' Group and enjoyed newly renovated single or twin bed–study units upstairs in Morrison House. While the development of Mossgiel into cottage boarding units was underway, female boarders lived in Morrison House during 1975 and 1976. Some male boarders moved to the new Mossgiel units which opened that year, and the sixteen female boarders enrolled by 1977 lived from that year in Mossgiel. Two new Houses, Coles and Wettenhall, created in 1975, replaced Mackie and Warrinn, so that there were still six sporting Houses – the others being Shannon, Calvert, McArthur and Morrison – in which to mix all boarders and day students. Mackie and Warrinn became the names of the boarding houses only. This was Mr Thwaites' final gesture in seeking 'to solve some of the problems of relationships between boarders and day boys which are still not fully satisfactory'.¹⁸ As the school grew in size, two more Houses – McLean in 1980 and Keith in 1981 – were added.

Even aside from the introduction of female boarders, the 1970s was a tumultuous decade in the history of boarding at the College for several other reasons. A slump in the rural economy saw boarding numbers decline dramatically at independent schools around Victoria. Numbers at the College plummeted from 288 in 1971 to 88 by 1979. The College's dominant boarding culture dropped away and its identity became that of a day school with some boarders, some of whom were themselves becoming more ambivalent about the boarding experience. Boarder Scott Davies (1977), for example, expressed views that boarders from ten or twenty years earlier would not have dared to utter: 'A student must be an individual, this I believe is one of the greatest problems of the boarding system. Boarding life tends to reject those who are different, who stand up strongly for what they believe, those who try but rarely succeed. Yet I feel that boarders set the pulse of the school.'¹⁹ Weekly boarding was introduced in 1973 to prop up declining numbers, but met with limited success. Boarding fees were frozen in 1975 to encourage current boarders to stay and new ones to enrol, but this strategy resulted only in an alarming deficit in the boarding house budget.²⁰ New Principal Mr Gebhardt's first report

to Council at the beginning of 1976 suggested that 'at least part of the answer to the problem must lie in the boarding conditions ... Mackie House is worse than anything I have seen for a long time'.²¹

Against this difficult backdrop, in 1977 Mr Gebhardt proposed the total abolition of boarding. His vision, discussed with Geelong Grammar's Headmaster Charles Fisher (1974–78) before the latter's sudden death, was to formalise the growing trend of The Geelong College as the area's day school and Geelong Grammar as the boarding school.²² The College would never be able to compete with Geelong Grammar's boarding prestige. It was regarded as 'socially, the top school for boys in Australia – the school Prince Charles went to, the school foreign diplomats send their sons to, the school boys are sent from overseas to'.²³ Mr Gebhardt discussed the matter with Council at length, and outlined in some detail his philosophical opposition to boarding, on the grounds that it breeds 'insensitivity', 'institutional dependence', 'group conformity' at the expense of the individual, and creates an artificial community.²⁴ The decline in numbers had made the College primarily a day school anyway, and Mr Gebhardt perceived those boarders who remained as an embattled minority. Mr Macmillan was convinced that the money spent on boarding would be far better directed to improved facilities for the whole student body, and this opinion was strengthened by his experience at Brighton Grammar, which since abolishing boarding had 'developed considerably in terms of staff, facilities and curriculum'.²⁵ Mr Happell was in complete agreement with the Principal about boarding. They had been boarders together at Geelong Grammar: 'neither of us liked it, we wanted to get rid of it at Geelong College and we couldn't, which was disappointing'.²⁶

Council refused to support the proposal to abandon boarding altogether. Many members strongly believed in the school's 'responsibility to the isolated family and the benefits of boarding for everyone', and of 'living and working together and of the wider horizons which this develops, particularly for the remote student'.²⁷ As something of a compromise, and with only twelve boarders below Form 2 level enrolled in 1977, Preparatory School boarding ceased (temporarily) at the end of 1979. Unfortunately, the boarding issue caused an irrevocable rift between the new Principal on the one side and, on the other, some members of Council and the powerful Western District Old Collegians, 'who saw it as a birthright to be educated at Geelong College [and] were upset and cross that they couldn't enrol their sons as boarders' from before Year 9.²⁸ Some Council members believed that 'under no circumstances would [Mr Gebhardt's] appointment as Principal of Geelong College have been made had he given any evidence of his attitude to boarding' during the selection process.²⁹ However, Mr Gebhardt believes that he was given a clear brief for change by the Council when he was appointed.³⁰ In some people's eyes, his attitude towards boarding marked him during the rest of his incumbency as being against those things perceived to be the College's finest traditions. It did not take him long to realise that 'the past has had a powerful grip on how the school should function and the purposes it should serve'.³¹

A member of Council, Mr Neilson, reflected on the episode a few years later: 'There has been some trauma which resulted from the reaction to change ... from a very small minority of the staff, from there to the students, and then through to parents. Some people saw some of the things that they regarded as traditions being challenged and Mr Gebhardt and the Council see some things regarded as traditions as things that we could well do without.'³² Old Collegians such as Hugh Bromell saw it like this: 'The spirit in the school came from the boarders ... there's a lot of uneasiness in this district among ex-students who are now faced with what to do with their children. The limited boarding life of the College, the message that there might



Preparatory boys receiving treatment at the school hospital from Sister Mayne, 1959. Heath Wallace Koch is looking on



Mackie House sketched by Percy Everett

not be any in a few years, makes the decision very difficult in deciding about enrolments.³³ Although the College Council refused to consider the total abolition of boarding, there was no doubt that the College was about to undergo enormous change. Mr Happell expressed it this way: 'The school system in which the College has operated for so long is, albeit slowly and reluctantly, changing. Co-education breached the walls; other social and economic factors are now combining to threaten the city.'³⁴ Some families who wanted boarding facilities earlier than Form 3 went to Geelong Grammar, or began to explore alternatives closer to their homes.

When cuts to government funding of independent schools were announced in 1982, budget cuts at the College were unavoidable. Mr Gebhardt took the opportunity to reiterate his belief in boarding's unworkability:

My suggestion concerning boarding was not done to upset boarders or to upset a group of parents in some distant part of the state, but rather to acknowledge that that was a service that we should no longer continue to offer. My concern has been to forge an identity for the school which would enable it to survive into the next century, believing as I did that it couldn't survive on the generosity of government.³⁵

The Principal's financial solutions to the government funding cuts included moving the remaining female boarders into Mackie, which could be divided for that purpose, and the subdivision of the Mossgiel units into townhouses to rent. The income would be directed to the Endowment Fund, to help keep fees low and enrolments up. Fees must not 'become so great that we become a social and economic irrelevance'.³⁶ Not surprisingly, the Principal's suggestions went unheeded.

Boarder numbers continued to decline, however, to a low of seventy in 1985, and the long-term viability of the boarding house has been questioned periodically ever since, especially following subsequent downturns in the rural economy caused by droughts and recessions. The next Principal, Mr Sheahan, reintroduced boarding at Years 7 and 8 and stated his philosophical support for boarding as being 'the heart and soul of the school'.³⁷ By 1987, there were forty-five female boarders – sufficient to fill Mossgiel – and so from that time Mossgiel became the girls' boarding house, and all the boys lived at Mackie under the watchful eye of 'living treasure' Ann Vile as Matron (1987–2005).³⁸ The girls and boys came together at school during the day, in the dining hall at mealtimes, and at social events on the weekends, as well as for special events such as the annual Beach Trip to Lorne at the start of the school year. Numbers grew to ninety-eight in 1989, and despite the Pyramid Building Society crash and the wider economic recession of the early 1990s, there were still eighty-one boarders in 1991. The majority still came from the Western District, as far west as Casterton, with the rest from Melbourne, the goldfields area, Horsham, Mildura and some locations near the border of Victoria and New South Wales: Kerang, Echuca, Deniliquin and Finley. None enrolled from Gippsland.³⁹ Lifelong friendships continued to be made, and new traditions were started. During Nigel Fairbairn's (1986–91) and Craig Considine's (1984–99) periods as Head of Mackie in the 1980s and 1990s, the annual Double Wicket Cricket Competition was a highlight. The Urbans vs Rurals Inter-House Softball Match developed in the same period,

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Mackie Study, 1962. Photo: Stephen Miles Album

Warrinn, Dorm 8, 1962. Photo: Stephen Miles Album



and by 1995 the contest was played as a Football Match for the boys and a Softball Match for the girls. The 'Mackie All Stars vs The Rest' Football Match also began that year.⁴⁰

Mackie House underwent extensive renovations in 1995, to adopt the single bedroom–study model advocated two decades earlier by the architect. A handful of overseas boarders from Asia, enrolled as boarders from the late 1980s, increased to over ten from 1995. The boarding houses were at capacity that year, with 110 students and the future of boarding once again looked promising, with numbers over 100 again in 1996 and 1997. There were so many girls in Mossgiel, partly because of the influx from Morongo when it closed, that Year 9 female boarders lived at Lester Square in 1995, a house owned by the College on the corner of Talbot Street and Noble Street that was used as, among other things, overflow boarding accommodation. They were reunited in Mossgiel in 1996, coinciding with the appointment of the first female Head of the girls' boarding house, Mrs O'Loughlin (1996–2002).

By 2001, with a slump to eighty boarders, it was clear that there were more factors at work than simply the drought and rural recession. Western District families were choosing local schools in regional towns – either through economic necessity or a new and growing parental preference to keep the children at or near home. Between 1990 and 2000, the number of boarding students in Victoria decreased by 32 per cent.⁴¹ Other boarding schools, particularly Ballarat Grammar and Ballarat and Clarendon College, became attractive options closer to home for some, and with a pricetag some 25 per cent less than the cost of boarding at The Geelong College.⁴² Major boarding reviews in 1999 and 2005 looked at every possible marketing strategy. The two new Boardinghouse Heads, Therese Foley (1990–present, and Head of Mossgiel since 2003) and Greg Smith (1990–present, and Head of Mackie since 2004), brought with them a deep understanding of the College from fifteen years each of teaching at the Senior School. Weekly and casual boarding was reintroduced, marketing in Asia was stepped up, and huge boarding fee reductions attempted to attract

Year 9 enrolments. International boarders quadrupled from a very low base, with many more students enrolling from China and Hong Kong.⁴³ A Boarders' Parents' Support Group was established in 2004. In 2009, significant refurbishment of both boarding houses was underway, and boarders now benefit from extra academic support provided by subject tutors. The severe drought has not broken, and realistically 'the long term prognosis for boarding in Australia is therefore not particularly strong', concluded Dr Turner in 2007.⁴⁴ However, the College's iron will to retain boarding appears to be justified, with a gratifying increase to ninety boarders by the end of 2009.



Above: Mossgiel

Below: Mossgiel Boarding House

